

HOUSES IN WESTERN AUSTRALIA.

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The subject of this paper is of a different character from those subjects usually discussed in lectures of this Society. It is, however, a very important one, as the health of the community is so largely dependent upon satisfactory housing conditions. Moreover, since we all live in houses, it is a subject of general interest: the layman as well as the architect can discover inconveniences or other faults of the house he occupies, or he has ideas of what a house should be to suit his particular views.

Speaking generally, houses must be well situated, pleasant to look upon, healthy to live in, and carefully studied in their arrangements, whilst at the same time being economically and substantially built. To secure these virtues great skill and mature knowledge are essential in the designer, probably in a greater degree than is required for a more complex and expensive building. This fact is not generally known, and all kinds of people take it upon themselves to build houses without the most elementary training for the work, whilst any architect of experience has heard enough opinions from so-called practical people to make an expert of him. It is a popular idea amongst ladies who are interested in houses that an architect either never heard of such a thing as a cupboard, or, from natural infirmity common to his class, has not sufficient skill to design one. It is difficult to remove that impression and from the houses one sees in this country I think the opinion is quite justifiable, and that is one of the reasons for the reading of this paper.

A house may be a mansion, a villa, or a cottage, but whatever it is, it should be of a design adapted to the local climate and circumstances, and of materials readily obtainable in the neighbourhood.

On this vast continent, extending through many latitudes, with varied climates, soil, and local building materials, we require many different types of dwellings. A house for Perth is not suitable for Carnarvon, nor is a country house at Kojonup right for Kimberley. The requirements are entirely different both for climate and material.

In Spain and Italy the houses differ materially from those in England in style and arrangement, and they are not interchangeable. Yet in Australia one builds houses in semi-tropical parts almost fit for an English town. As far as circumstances go, the canvas shanty

of the goldfields and the woodcutter's slab hut have more of fitness for the locality and circumstances than many of our ordinary houses.

Our usual type of dwelling is derived from England, whereas our climate and ways of living call for an Italian house, with its piazza, plain elevation, and heavily projecting eaves. We have copied our verandahs and balconies from Holland and Germany, but the inside of the house is certainly English. There has been little attempt at designing a really Australian house. One might at first glance say that the ordinary Queensland wooden houses are colonial, but they are not, their only idiosyncrasy being the height they are built off the ground. This serves no good purpose, and only reminds one of the ancient Swiss lake-dwellings.

Now, many of us are trying to copy some Californian type of house, but transplanting it from a block of an acre or two to one of 40 feet or less frontage only converts it into a curtailed mongrel. More especially, when the roof is covered with that material so much prized by Australians, viz., corrugated galvanised iron of Gospel Oak, Anchor, or Orb brand. It is hateful to look at, but fortunately it is no longer cheap. As an alternative, we sometimes use tiles, but that is because they come from France. If they had originally been made in Australia they would never have come into use, for the Australian is a free lover and prefers every country's products to his own; even including soldiers' wives. For this reason, there is still only $\frac{3}{4}$ of a man to the square mile over the whole area of Australia. A country that is endowed by nature with very possible material for building, fitting and furnishing a house still rakes the furthest ends of the earth for them; as a nation I suppose we beat every other in our imports of those articles. My aim is to bring about the building of a house of Australian type with Australian materials, for Australians to live in.

How bountifully we are supplied with forests of building timbers of every kind, hard and soft, and of the most beautiful in the world for furniture and cabinet work. Can we find anything handsomer than the Queensland cedar or our jarrah for red timbers, Tasmanian blackwood, teak, or Queensland bean tree for brown, and all the varieties of light-coloured timbers for lining walls or ceilings, and for furniture? Eight hundred catalogued varieties in Queensland alone! And yet we import "British oak" from Austria and Japan, fir from the Baltic, and oregon from America. Some makers are actually selling furniture made of Australian timbers under the name of English oak, as they know it will sell more readily than under the proper Australian name. Why did we leave off using locally-made pantiles and our fine old sheoak shingles and take to galvanised iron, thereby encouraging people in the dirty habit of drinking roof water mixed with the blow-off from filthy streets? If a material or an article cannot be found or manufactured in one State, it is possible to get it from another, without leaving this Con-

inent at all. Let us be imbued with a national feeling and promote the use of our own products.

When one has the selection of one's home, one should first consider the locality, then the street, and then the block, and it is fairly certain that one will considerably modify his requirements before a decision is arrived at. Means of access, distance, surroundings, and healthiness have all to be taken into account. But once having settled all these points, the actual home enclosure is one's own particular business, and if one is not competent to deal with that himself, the obvious method is to consult an expert adviser, or to employ him altogether. But whoever the adviser may be, let it be certain he is not what is known as "a practical man." He is as ignorant as a Bolshevik, and as brainless as a kewpie. He is not practical, but a vain fool, and taking his advice generally entails wasted expense and dissatisfaction.

I am confining my future remarks chiefly to the metropolitan area, as the subject is too vast to travel over the State.

The foolish stereotyped method of subdividing land without respect to local features or contours, and blocks in the one locality being all of the same size, makes the choice of a building site very troublesome. Until town planning has been in vogue for many years one will have to submit to the evils resulting from this method, and suffer the harassing restrictions of antiquated municipal by-laws. These are benefits of civilisation which we shall probably confer on the inhabitants of our about-to-be-acquired German colonies who are at present living the healthy life that all uncivilised aborigines enjoy.

A chain frontage is, I think, the least one can put up with. The usual 40 or 50 feet block is really too narrow for an ordinary house for a family of, say, six persons in comfortable circumstances. One's neighbours are too near, and there is not sufficient room to properly adapt the house to the proper aspect for the various compartments. The result is that one sees so many houses which are, so to speak, "too big for their boots." This is notably the case in the most sought-for localities. Houses for artisans have in this respect, a distinct advantage over others, and many of them are well and pleasantly located. But the professional man or the business man, who likes two or three sitting rooms, has a trouble in settling a house of his requirements on a block of such restricted frontage. This brings about the congested appearance that some streets present, and it produces monotony in that there is not sufficient space around the house for shrubberies, etc., which so largely conduce to the health and charm of a dwelling. The setting of a house is as important as the architectural features, which should be as few as possible, and altogether it should display dignified simplicity. One or two extremely plain looking houses about Perth strike me as particularly charming on account of the free-and-easy, not stiff, arrangement or want of arrangement of trees, shrubs, and walks.

The ever-recurring couch-grass lawns, and the neatly trimmed hedges which are gradually attaining to the height of a lamp post, pall on the passer-by, and they also display a lack of thought or interest in not devising something more varied. It is pleasanter to look at a garden where one can throw down a match, or where children can play, without causing disfigurement. The drawing-room carpet out of doors is neither comfortable nor homely. Houses not being asylums or gaols, there is no necessity for enclosing them with high hedges which hold the dust off the road and check the breeze, unless to hide the bed neatly arranged alongside the front door outside the drawing room window—an arrangement entailed by bad planning.

People might remember that there are other hedge shrubs besides macrocarpia, pittosporum, plumbago, and box. The macrocarpia or pittosporum hedges and the green patch in front of the house have been done to death in Perth, and a change is required. In many cases the absence of a hedge or fence would be a distinct improvement.

Turning our thoughts to the style of house most suitable for a suburb, we find the cottage type prevails, and rightly so, as it is simple and economical, and it can be made as pleasing as desired. Now that the garden city idea has begun to be applied to the development of suburban estates, there will be less crowding, larger gardens, more open spaces, and houses grouped with regard to architectural effect. Aspect and vista, and greater freedom of design, can then be considered. "Houses are built to live in, and not to look on," said Francis Bacon, but fortunately this aphorism was not accepted in his day, nor should it be in ours. Too often the exterior of the house seems to be designed to suit the street or road, with a pretentious front, defaced by superfluous and meretricious ornamentation, whilst the sides are plain and rough, and the back mean and squalid. A house should suggest refinement, repose, and individuality, and present an honest face to every quarter. What is more vulgar than a house with the brick front painted with hideous so-called tuckpointing, and the adjacent sides of plain bad brickwork, or a boarded wall imitating stone blocks? In Adelaide I saw a house with stamped zinc imitation stone weather-boards in front and corrugated iron on the side walls! There is more sham and shoddy work about many of the modern houses than in those of years ago. The old red brick pensioner's houses present an air of honest respectability entirely lacking in hundreds of more recent erections. "Design with beauty; build in truth" is the motto of the London Architectural Association. Let us avoid shams both in construction and in materials.

The controlling factor in the design of any building is the plan. If we have higher ideals of home life, and correspondingly higher and more complex requirements in planning, these must have the most important effect on the exterior—on the style of the design.

Ruskin said something to the effect that a building in which the roof is not a prominent feature cannot be considered of good design, but he was not thinking of a galvanised iron or asbestos roof. And it is, of course, well known that in arranging the plan of a house, one always bears the roofing in mind.

In studying the planning of houses in Western Australia, it appears to be almost a rule to bring the best rooms to the front of the house, irrespective of aspect and convenience. The narrow width of frontage may, in many cases, account for this, but often it could by more consideration be avoided. Little regard is paid to the privacy of the bedrooms, and the sitting room and kitchen, where, in many cases, the lady of the house has to spend the greater portion of the time, often look out on the side fence. In many cases the sun never shines into these apartments. There should be no gloomy rooms, and the door of the best bedroom should not be opposite the front door.

Very great attention to the kitchen will have to be paid in future, as the lack of domestic assistance will be greater than ever. Consequently, it must be conveniently situated, of fair dimensions, well ventilated and lighted, with a cheerful lookout, and provided with every contrivance to save labour, and to render the duties performed therein as palatable as is possible. I might almost say that it should have more consideration than any other apartment. The stove should be placed so that the draught does not blow out the ashes, and with the arch high enough to allow one to look into the pots without striking one's head, and if possible it should have a light at the back of the fireplace. The sink should preferably be movable and away from the walls, not enclosed underneath, the pipe for the tap being extended and the drainpipe detachable to discharge into a fixed outlet in the floor. The walls should have a hard-faced dado all round of tiles or cement, whilst the upper portion should be oil painted, or washable distemper. No moulding or architraves, skirting, or doors should be allowed as these are dust traps, and all angles of walls should be rounded at intersections and at floor and ceiling. The cupboards for crockery should have glazed sliding doors, and the pots should be placed on proper shelves, or hung on proper bracketing, and not have to be deposited on the floor. If the sink or table have to touch the wall, the dado should be high enough to keep splashes off the main portion of wall. If there is no ice-chest, there should be a cool safe set against a louvred opening in an outer wall.

The laundry should be adjacent to the kitchen, and a decent apartment, not a rough shed. The copper-boiler and tubs should have lids, and there should be an ironing-table and hinged skirt board to fold up against the wall. The walls should be at least of neat brickwork whitewashed, or jarrah boarding, the ceiling of painted jarrah boards, with a ventilator, and the floor of polished

cement concrete, vintoid, or red earthenware squares. There should, if possible, be a broom-cupboard, or otherwise suitable pegs.

The other rooms would be designed to suit the individual tastes of the owner, and it is not possible to deal with them *in extenso* in this paper. I think, however, that economy of labour, and simplicity of design should govern the general rooms. For small rooms it is not necessary to have them as lofty as the larger ones; 10 feet, or even nine feet, would often be sufficient height. The position of doors and windows and fireplaces should be carefully studied with an eye to the emplacing of furniture. Windows should extend as far down to floor and up to the ceiling as possible. The air above window openings is more or less stagnant. The style of window should be varied to suit the rooms. A simpler treatment of wood-work should be adopted; the prevalent moulded architraves, skirtings, and cornices could more fitly be plain to avoid harbouring dust and to look less vulgar than many I have seen. The centre-flower in the ceiling, and the coved cornice, might well be dispensed with. The modern way of treating the ceiling and deep frieze in continuation to the picture rail is a good and pleasing practice. The treatment of the walls can be simple or more elaborate, all according to taste and fitness.

In a wooden house, the walls and ceilings, instead of being plastered, might be of Australian timber boarding, divided into panels by plain strips if funds will permit. Where plastered or boarded the ceiling might also display the ceiling joists with good effect.

The trade size of doors is of unpleasant proportions, the metre unit gives a better appearance. The four panels have also had a long run; let us have something fresh. On the continent of Europe doors very often have curved heads and look well. Folding or sliding doors are often more convenient than doors in one leaf for large rooms. Bedroom doors should have opening fanlights.

The fixed lavatory with water laid on is, to my mind, a good innovation for bedrooms, as the principal washing is done in the bath-room. With a neat tiled back it could be made a pleasing feature in a room, and save labour.

In houses with a drainage system there should be a slop sink in proper closet.

The dining room should have near communication with the kitchen. One should not have to pass the front door nor walk a 30ft. passage to bring in meals.

Although many people have another opinion, I hold that a visitor should be able to go into the dining or drawing rooms without passing a bedroom door, and I know no good reason for placing the principal bedroom in the front of the house, unless it is for the owner to be handy to attack an intruding burglar, who, by the way, seldom enters by the front door.

There should be ample cupboards for linen, stores, clothes, boxes, etc., conveniently disposed about the house. There is a sad lack of these necessities in most houses.

The bathroom is, I am pleased to say, an object of great interest to most Australians, and where means allow, it is everything that it should be. The modern custom of putting it *in* the house, instead of on the back verandah, or under the house among the piles, as they often do in Queensland, is where it should be. It might be still better placed amongst the bedrooms, and not between the drawing and dining rooms as in many cases I know. In passing plumber's shops, I note that plain galvanised iron baths are still sold. They should be prohibited, as also the sinks of the same material. If one cannot afford the expense of the enamel steel bath, the locally made cement ones are a good substitute. The washtroughs of this material are fortunately gradually coming into use, and are within the means of all householders. The English pattern of common stoneware sink is a very suitable article and is made here, but, on account of some regulation I understand the imported steel one must be used. As I have before stated, it should be possible to use local manufacture for everything about a house: the demand will create the supply. We should copy the Americans in thinking that what our own country produces is best for us.

Before leaving this part of the subject, I wish to call attention to the usual position of the E.C., mostly obtrusive and unsightly, inconvenient in sickness, and probably very often the cause of colds. If there is a sewerage system, there is no good reason against having it inside the house. If otherwise, it should be nearer the dwelling and camouflaged by attachment to a woodshed or washhouse. As at present, it is a vulgar abomination. The inside treatment is also bad and rough. Hard, smooth-plastered ceiling and walls, or wood lining, and a good close floor, either of cement or wood, are requisite. The seat should invariably be of polished jarrah; in England they always use polished mahogany. The existing by-laws should be altered to suit these requirements.

Regarding the materials for constructing the house, the primary factor is cost. One should, if possible, employ materials obtainable in the locality; stone or brick, if available, otherwise wood, asbestos, slate, or a mixture of all. The now popular red brick and cement rough-cast for walls, and red tiles for the roof, are not easily improved upon. The qualities to be avoided, both in bricks and tiles, are those which many people seem to value most highly—brightness, uniformity of tint, and smoothness of surface, thereby producing a stiff doll's-house appearance. One should use those with accidental variation of tint, which aids artistic effect, and tones down to a pleasant mellow harmony. Very often a more rugged and massive style of walling might be erected; the pretty, smooth kind prevails too much. Good bricks and tiles are now made locally, or elsewhere

in Australia, and even though the first cost of the latter is relatively high, they permanently add to the duration, comfort, and appearance of a building. The makers will, however, have to produce a lighter plain ridging to replace the existing clumsy and heavy one. Cheap plain flat red tiles in varied shades should also be manufactured for use on roofs and as alternative covering for walls. Slates and iron are both stiff in appearance, and the latter allows the heat to pass through.

The verandah is a very important part of a house, for besides protecting it from the sun's rays, it serves the purpose of a sitting place, and, now-a-days, it is in general use for sleeping out. It is therefore, worthy of being treated as an integral portion of the building, and instead of the general paltry construction with much unnecessary woodwork and mean turned posts, it would be more dignified with stout columns or masonry piers, heavy beams and a good roof. The floor should preferably be of concrete or tiles—red earthenware squares being very suitable. In the country, a verandah around the house seems to be appropriate, but in town or the suburbs it is sufficient to have one in a suitable position, not necessarily near the entrance, of spacious dimensions, for sitting about, and another for sleeping out near the bedrooms. This latter might be louvred or enclosed with fly-proof gauze, or it might have windows and louvres. At any rate, the air should be always in motion through the verandah, and the beds should not be exposed to public view, as they generally are. Wall beds might be used where space is limited.

The oscillating portal wall-bed is a very convenient method of disposing of the beds out of sight in the daytime, but of course this adds considerably to the initial cost of a house—about £40 per bed.

Sleeping-out, with thick blinds hung on to the verandah, is hardly more healthy than sleeping indoors.

It is strange that although most houses have the roof pitched fairly high, no use is made of the space between that and the ceiling. It is a great waste of space. Without going to much expense in the way of a staircase, a plain flight of stairs could be constructed and a large portion of the roof space enclosed as attics. These could be used as servants' bedrooms and box rooms, or provide a good playroom for children. Of course, the size of the attic would not conform to the size of the rooms below and it would be unnecessary to carry up the lower walls. Single boarded partitions only would be required in the attic, and asbestos or plaster boards would form the ceilings and keep out the heat. Dormer windows properly placed would give plenty of ventilation, and, if properly constructed, there is no reason to fear that attics would be too hot.

Respecting wooden houses, the municipal authorities wrongly restrict their erection to certain areas in the suburban townships, thereby greatly damaging our timber industry, and entailing unnecessary additional expenditure for brick or stone. In many cases

this leads to people refraining from building. There is a foolish prejudice against wooden houses, whereas you all have seen in magazines, cinemas, etc., what delightful timber buildings are erected in America. I do not refer to Queensland as, although the houses there are principally wood, they are generally of such mean type that one would not be induced to employ that material after seeing them. A house with stone or brick base and walls partly of weatherboards and shingles of tiles, pleasingly intermixed, can be made to satisfy the taste of most people. It can be rendered absolutely water-tight and to last a century. Such a house with proper insulation in walls is cool in summer and warm in winter.

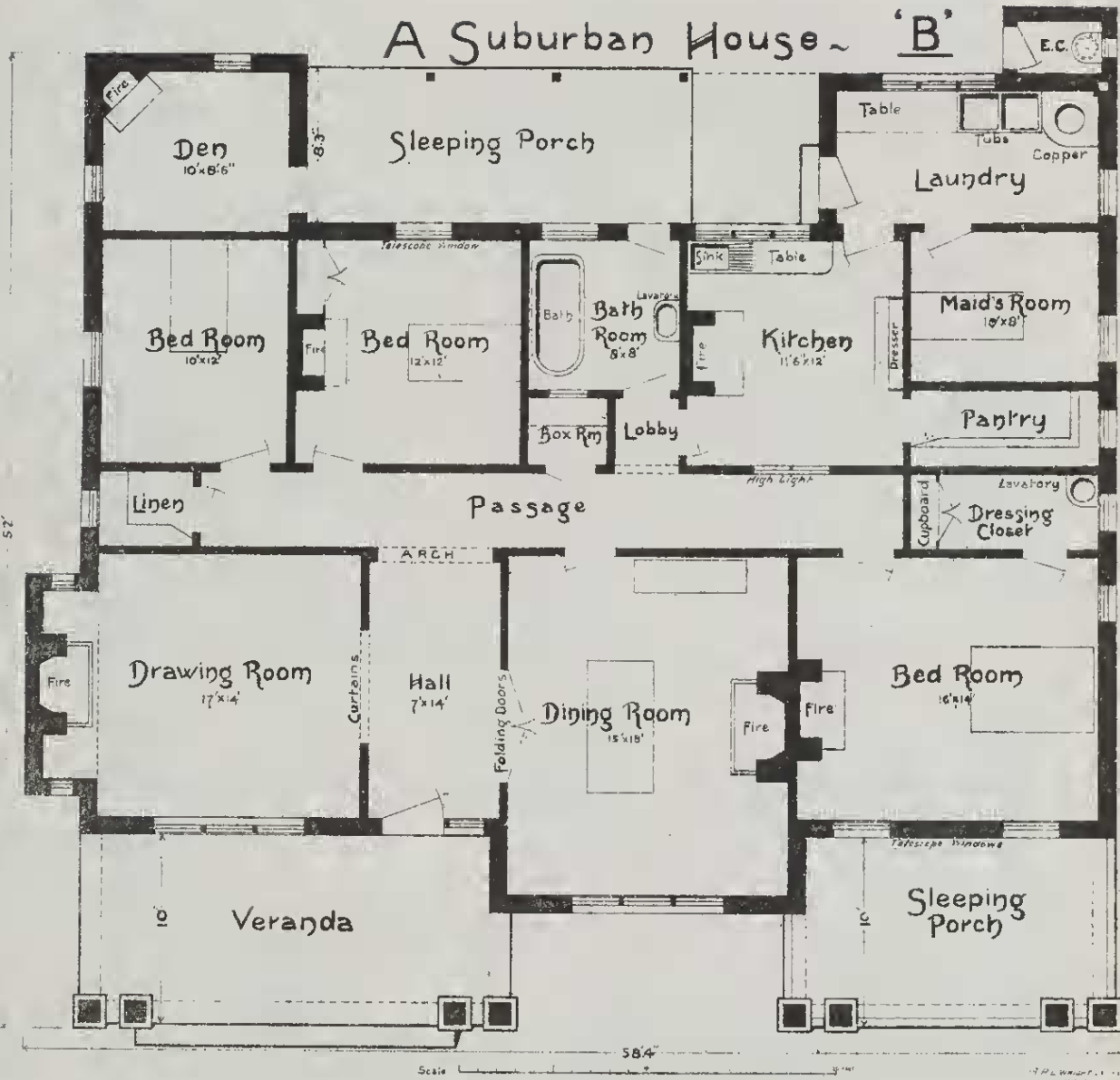
I have already sufficiently animadverted on the use of galvanised iron for roofs, and I extend this objection to fences. No public authority should allow a galvanised iron fence to be erected alongside a street; it is an offence against good taste. Boards or split palings can be used which will tone down with age and produce a homely artistic appearance, and be equally enduring and purposeful.

Finally, let householders study landscape gardening, then they will discover how, by comparatively simple arrangement, an ordinary building block can be made a pleasure to themselves and to the general public. It has always struck me as a display of selfishness to hide our gardens behind close hedges. It is the duty of every citizen to assist in improving the town he inhabits and to promote the welfare of his fellow men. Surely if one has been blessed with means to erect a good dwelling with a beautiful garden, one might at least share this pleasure with those who pass by, some of whom may be in less fortunate circumstances. In this respect, Continental, American, and Canadian people put English people to shame. The gardens in front of their houses are visible to everybody and add greatly to the charm of their cities. If I were a town-councillor, I should endeavour to bring in a by-law prohibiting a high close hedge or fence in front of a residence. We should all help to make the City Beautiful and thereby elevate our fellows.

This paper does not pretend to give any instructions, nor to dogmatise in any way. Everyone has his own particular ideas and most of you probably have at one time or another been interested in buildings, but these few remarks will serve as reminders.

The plans shown are simply an indication of the essential features to make a comfortable home, and are all entirely different in arrangement of the various apartments. Being drawn to the same scale, comparison is made easier. One can vary any plan in many different ways, and it is not possible within the scope of this paper to illustrate the exteriors. You can see them in plenty in various publications, also I believe at some drapery or other establishments in the city.

A Suburban House - 'B'



25

E.C.

Scale

58' 4"

J.P.L. WRIGHT